

Celebrating goals and surrounding the referee – adapting interaction on the pitch in times of social distancing in the English Premier League

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing research interest in the effects of social distancing measures introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on social interaction, interpersonal relationships, and personal wellbeing. In the soccer arena, too, players, referees, managers, and fans are subject to social distancing measures when engaging in joint activities in times of the pandemic. This paper examines to what extent agents on the soccer pitch have adapted joint communicative acts such as goal celebrations and surrounding the referee as part of social distancing measures. It does so by focusing particularly on interactions between player-player (goal celebrations) and player-referee (issuing of yellow/red cards) in broadcasted Premier League games pre- and post-lockdown during the 2019/20 season by examining and comparing two datasets: games in the last round before the three-month lockdown break (round 29, 10 games, 7–9 March 2020) and the games in the first round after the restart of season 2019/20 with the implemented social distancing rules as prescribed by the Premier League's *Season 2019/20Restart Guide* (round 30, 10 games, 19–22 June 2020). Based on an exploratory, qualitative multimodal analysis of a total of 43 goal celebrations and the issuing of 66 yellow cards and one red card in the two datasets, we highlight varying realizations of similar joint communicative acts, thereby demonstrating how agents on the pitch adapt their interaction to social distancing rules. The results show players' occasional hesitation to gather closely with other players to celebrate a goal and their deviation to more common practices of engaging with others during times of COVID-19, for example fist bumps. Adaptation of interaction can also be observed with regard to player-referee interactions following a booking, most notably concerning surrounding the referee in contested decisions: While players still move towards the referee seemingly crowding the referee, there is, in some scenes, a visible restraint by players to ensure enough distancing between the players and the referee.

Introduction and aim

Following the widespread introduction of social distancing measures as a consequence of COVID-19, there is a growing research interest in the effect of such measures on social interaction, interpersonal relationships, and personal wellbeing.¹ The measures taken to prevent the spread of

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COVID-19 have impacted people's lives in almost every aspect. Consequently, the way people communicate with each other has also been affected as social distancing rules have altered how and how often we interact with each other.²

Without question, interaction and communication play a crucial role in sports, too, especially in team sports, where effective intra-team communication and decision-making can be a contributing factor for success.³ From a linguistic perspective, communication in soccer has so far been researched mainly with a focus on the discourses surrounding the respective sport,⁴ e.g. specific language use in (online) soccer commentary and reporting,⁵ social media use in soccer,⁶ or discourses surrounding fan communication.⁷ Interaction and communication on the pitch, i.e. during training or an actual game, however, has not yet been intensively investigated, but has recently received more attention.⁸

As in many professional domains, agents in the soccer arena have had to adapt to COVID-19 pandemic regulations such as social distancing measures in order to prevent the virus from infecting athletes and possibly damaging their health as well as contributing to the collective effort to reduce the spread of the disease.⁹ Soccer is a team as well as a contact sport, thus social distancing especially during training and games inevitably affects how agents on the pitch interact and communicate with each other.

We hypothesize that these social distancing measures do not necessarily limit interactions in soccer but change them. There are, to this date, no studies documenting in detail how social distancing measures have affected, if at all, such behaviour. The present, exploratory study thus aims to investigate the following question: To what extent do agents on the pitch adapt their way of interacting and communicating to social distancing measures?¹⁰

We aim to answer this question by focusing on the following two joint communicative acts:

- (1) player-player interactions, specifically goal celebrations
- (2) player-referee interactions, specifically after game interruptions due to bookings

Using the theoretical model of joint communicative acts¹¹ we examine scenes of goal celebrations and referee-player interactions after bookings in the 10 games prior to the lockdown of the Premier League (Season 2019/20) and the 10 games after its restart three months later. More specifically, we hope to detail how the implementation of social distancing measures as part of Project Restart has possibly impacted the way players celebrate scoring or approach the referee.

The selected joint communicative acts are a selection of interaction scenarios which occur on the pitch during a game. The current study limits its analysis to situations which are observable in the recordings of soccer games. In the following, we will first report on the adaptations of interaction in times of COVID-19 as researched by Mondada and colleagues,¹² then link that to the theoretical framework of joint communicative acts and types of interactions encountered on the soccer pitch. This is followed by a description of the Project Restart in the Premier League including the data and methodology section before presenting the results on goal celebrations and referee-player interactions prior and after the lockdown.

Adapting interaction and communication in times of COVID-19

The project "Human Sociality in the Age of Covid-19", initiated in March 2020 by Lorenza Mondada and her team at the University of Basel, focuses on changing social and communicative practices during the pandemic, specifically on how people adjust and change their embodied behaviours with regard to pandemic-specific precautions and measures. The project includes various analyses based on video recordings of everyday social interactions in different settings, for example at university, in shops, markets and parks.¹³ Mondada and her team draw on multi-modal conversation analysis to systematically analyse greetings in public spaces.¹⁴ By examining video recordings depicting embodied greetings, they document shifts from routine greetings (pre-

pandemic) to more hesitated and even omitted greetings as a result of COVID-19. Further, they show how alternative ways of greeting, for example with elbow bumps or air hugs, are established. These changing communicative practices are, according to Mondada and colleagues, not unstructured but follow a clear sequential order which reflects the evolution and development of the pandemic. What is at stake in these social interactions are two aspects which Garfinkel¹⁵ associates with “accountability of actions”, namely the “intelligibility” of joint actions, the involved parties’ mutual understanding and coordination of the action, and the “normativity” of the action, including the parties’ aligning morals and trust in one another.

Another study by Mondada et al. focuses on the social activity of paying and how, besides changing their methods of paying, customers and salespeople have also adapted the way they interact with one another in these contexts.¹⁶ The authors show how such ordinary events as paying are re-negotiated in terms of their order and organization with agents aiming to prevent a further spreading of the virus, for example when the customer presents a certain hesitation to pay until the method of payment is made explicit by the salesperson.

The present study also focuses on social interactions which, in line with the foci by Mondada and colleagues, are seen as ordinary during a soccer game. Yet the soccer arena is subject to public broadcasting, and there is, as we claim, an additional dimension which may influence the evolution of interactions on the pitch: the public eye and the larger social pressure on the agents on the pitch to adhere to recommended precautions.

Setting the stage

Given our focus on joint communicative acts on the pitch and how these are adapted during times of social distancing, this theoretical section briefly introduces the concept of joint communicative acts, before discussing the typology of interaction we consider particularly important as regards joint communicative acts on the pitch.

Communicative acts as a pragmatic concept originate in Austin and Searle’s theory of speech acts.¹⁷ Based on this concept, Reich defined communicative acts as ‘overt attempts to influence an addressee, either in the form of soliciting specific and momentary cooperation or in the form of providing it’,¹⁸ thus highlighting the cooperative as well as the communicative (including non-verbal language) nature of such acts. While Reich’s definition and its further taxonomy are not entirely clear-cut,¹⁹ in the paper we use the term *joint communicative acts*, highlighting the collaborative and cooperative nature of interactions on the soccer pitch usually involving two agents or more. We thereby broadly lean on Reich’s original definition of a communicative act consisting of verbal and non-verbal resources that conveys an overt intent by the speaker to influence the action of him-/herself or the hearer.²⁰

For the current purpose, we consider the following two types of interactions on the pitch where joint communicative acts are particularly important: Interaction among players (1) and interactions between players and the referee (2). While there are also interactions between the manager and his/her team, and interactions between the fans and the team, these are not the focus of the present study and will not be detailed further.

1. Player-player interactions

While there is existing research on intra-team communication in sports, and in soccer specifically, this mainly stems from the field of psychology.²¹ For the current linguistic purpose, we consider two kinds of player-player interactions on the pitch, each including a variety of joint communicative acts: players’ communication with their own teammates vs. players’ interactions with the opposing team.

Players from the same team need to communicate their intentions to each other over a distance (the pitch) in order to play successfully as a team and eventually score a goal or prevent the opposing team from scoring. Tactical communication on the pitch needs to be effective and is

mostly limited to a few words and gestures.²² For one, this type of communication must also be effective if there is a loud crowd noise in the stadium. To put it in the words of Swiss national goalie Yann Sommer: “The louder it is in the stadium, the more body language is needed”.²³ Furthermore, using only few words and more body language is also particularly effective considering that football teams are often multilingual.²⁴

Yet not every interaction among teammates is strategic in nature, i.e. related to tactics or teamwork. Sometimes communicative acts use emotional language with the intent to stir up emotion. For instance, when team spirit is low, players can often be seen shouting at each other, which can function as a motivational factor.²⁵ Another emotion-oriented joint communicative act constitutes goal celebrations where the player scoring the goal is celebrating or is being celebrated, which is one of the foci of this study. In goal celebrations, the scoring players either alone or together with their teammates celebrate their achievement using “vocal and bodily gestures to express emotions”.²⁶

2. Player-referee interactions

Another important type of interaction on the pitch concerns the players’ interactions with the referee. The referee’s task is to lead the game fairly and if necessary, to enforce the rules of the game. The referee does so by using various means including verbal (issuing a warning or explaining/arguing with a player) and modal resources (gesturing, blowing the whistle or issuing yellow/red cards). These different communicative acts are necessary as the referees may have to direct their attention to various players simultaneously and may need to be able to communicate with each of them over a distance. The joint communicative act investigated in this paper concerns the referee-player interaction after a player has been booked. Especially as regards seemingly contested or unfair decisions by the referee, interactions with (a) player(s) can become more extensive and take on various forms (argument, discussion, insulting on the players’ side etc.). Even though the players’ vocal reactions do not seem to influence the referee’s decision-making, such reactions occur regularly in games.²⁷ To see how players and referees adapt to social distancing measures in such situations is thus one of the aims of this paper.

Both types of interactions have been affected, one way or another, by the measures taken in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Most notably, the absence of fans created an eerie atmosphere in the stadium, where verbal interaction on the pitch could suddenly be heard and understood better; a scenario agents on the pitch had to adapt to. Such adaptations of behaviour and joint communicative acts during the pandemic are of particular linguistic interest as they not only present exemplifications of adaptive communication, but also how misunderstandings can occur during the process of such adaptations. Many of those adaptations were required by officially implemented rules and regulations (e.g. imposed by governments). Likewise, the Premier League prepared official guidelines as will be outlined in the following.

Project restart: the Premier League restart guide

Similar to many sports and activities involving large gatherings of people and close physical contact, the Premier League announced precautions and measures in reaction to the developing COVID-19 pandemic. The Premier League interrupted the season on 13 March 2020 after Arsenal’s head manager Mikel Arteta had tested positive for COVID-19. In alignment with the UK’s first national lockdown announced on 23 March 2020, professional soccer was forced to shut down as well and the League was suspended for an indefinite period on April 3 as detailed in the following quote:

Following the suspension of the 2019/20 season . . . the Premier League worked closely with the Government, the whole of professional football in England, public agencies and other relevant stakeholders on Project Restart, with the aim of resuming the campaign when it was safe to do so.²⁸

Guidelines for Project Restart should follow national measures recommended by the UK government's health department and simultaneously enable a possible resuming of the game, thereby not impeding the rules of the game. With government approval, the season was resumed on 19 June 2020, albeit with no fans allowed in the stadiums.

The Premier League's *Season 2019/20 Restart Guide* includes the rules and regulations to safely continue the season after the lockdown.²⁹ The guide is concerned with everything from how to hold training sessions, how to behave in the locker rooms, and how to maintain social distancing on the pitch. In this study, we look at the latter, the so-called on-field protocols. Image 1 gives an overview of the on-field measures from the *Restart Guide*, ranging from social distancing to hygiene to conduct during the game. In particular, we focus on the framed regulations 1) *maintain distance during goal celebrations* and 2) *no surrounding match officials*, with the aim – as stated in our research question – of investigating to what extent these two measures lead to adapted interaction and communication on the field.



Image 1. The on-field protocols stated in the Premier League's *season 2019/20 Restart Guide*.³⁰

The decision to focus on the above-mentioned guidelines in particular is based on shared features of the underlying scenarios: a) goal celebrations and the surrounding of match officials (e.g. gathering around the referee) typically involve more than one agent and we are interested in joint communicative acts, and b) both events take place during the game itself, allowing us to hypothesize that players' efforts to follow the rules might be inhibited by their involvement in the game.³¹ Our analysis aims to explore whether agents adapt their communication on the pitch based on the advised measures and if so, how this adaptation shows in the agents interactive/communicative practices.

Data and method

To investigate whether and if, how communicative actions on the pitch were adapted, i.e. were re-negotiated to social distancing measures, we compiled a dataset containing games from before and after the implementation of the official protocol stated in the *Premier League Restart Guide*. As the clubs of the Premier League collectively developed the Restart Guide to ensure that they could resume and conclude the 2019/20 season, we expected to observe certain adapting behaviour based on players' and other agents' a) joint effort to adhere to this collective aim and b) their perceived responsibility towards the public. The dataset consists of video recordings of 20 soccer games from the Premier League season 2019/2020. Specifically, 10 games in the week prior to the COVID-break (game week 29, 7–9 March 2020) and 10 games in the first week after the League returned to the pitch (game week 30, 19–22 June 2020).

Tables 1 and 2 present an overview of the game schedule, including (from left to right) date, time, clubs, and score. The result in parentheses shows the intermediate result at half time, the other score is the final result.

The week immediately prior to and immediately after the COVID-break respectively were chosen as most representative, assuming that communication in earlier weeks would not differ (at least not on a large scale) from the final week pre-break, and the first week after the break would set the tone as to how teams reacted to the new rules. In addition to this, we assumed that the weeks following the implementation may have shown a certain inconsistency with regard to how guidelines were being followed – either due to a relaxation of general measures (UK-wide) or regarding players' and other involved agents' weariness of certain restrictions.

The recordings of the selected games were obtained from the freely available Website *Full Match Sports*.³⁴ All games were examined via a multimodal analysis focusing specifically on non-verbal communication, including such modes as gestures, body language and facial expressions.³⁵ While we may comment on certain sounds or noises (e.g. the artificial crowd noises), speech will not be taken into account as players' speech is not comprehensible in the videos and we hypothesize that due to social distancing measures, oral interaction between players (at least in close proximity) may be limited. In addition to the non-verbal communicative acts mentioned, we include further modal resources such as yellow/red cards. In line with Bezemer and Jewitt, we argue that all forms of communication are meaningful and fulfill social functions.³⁶ Especially, when social behaviour is

Table 1. Overview of the game schedule in week 29 (7–9 March 2020).³²

07/03/2020	12:30	Liverpool FC	-	AFC Bournemouth	2:1 (2:1)
	15:00	Arsenal FC	-	West Ham United	1:0 (0:0)
	15:00	Crystal Palace	-	Watford FC	1:0 (1:0)
	15:00	Sheffield United	-	Norwich City	1:0 (1:0)
	15:00	Southampton FC	-	Newcastle United	0:1 (0:0)
	15:00	Wolverhampton Wanderers	-	Brighton & Hove Albion	0:0 (0:0)
	17:30	Burnley FC	-	Tottenham Hotspur	1:1 (1:0)
08/03/2020	14:00	Chelsea FC	-	Everton FC	4:0 (2:0)
	16:30	Manchester United	-	Manchester City	2:0 (1:0)
09/03/2020	20:00	Leicester City	-	Aston Villa	4:0 (1:0)

Table 2. Overview of the game schedule in week 30 (19–22 June 2020).³³

19/06/2020	18:00	Norwich City	-	Southampton FC	0:3 (0:0)
	20:15	Tottenham Hotspur	-	Manchester United	1:1 (1:0)
20/06/2020	12:30	Watford FC	-	Leicester City	1:1 (0:0)
	15:00	Brighton & Hove Albion	-	Arsenal FC	2:1 (0:0)
	17:30	West Ham United	-	Wolverhampton Wanderers	0:2 (0:0)
21/06/2020	19:45	AFC Bournemouth	-	Crystal Palace	0:2 (0:2)
	14:00	Newcastle United	-	Sheffield United	3:0 (0:0)
	16:15	Aston Villa	-	Chelsea FC	1:2 (1:0)
	19:00	Everton FC	-	Liverpool FC	0:0 (0:0)
22/06/2020	20:00	Manchester City	-	Burnley FC	5:0 (3:0)

under public scrutiny (the fans, amongst others, were closely observing players' behaviours), it is of interest to see how meaning is negotiated through various non-verbal communicative acts. Our analysis is neither quantified nor extensive, but of exploratory nature.

As argued above, we are especially interested in the adaptations with regard to the two joint communicative acts in the time before and after the implementation of the restart guidelines. The exploratory methodological approach included the following steps:

- (1) close viewing of the chosen games, identification of the relevant scenes, namely goal celebrations (player-player interactions) and players' behaviour after game interruptions due to bookings of players by the referee (player-referee interactions)
- (2) repeated viewing of the chosen instances,³⁷
- (3) framing of the chosen communicative situations.

In the case of the goal celebrations, we focused on all 43 goals scored in the two datasets, thereby paying particular attention to the goal scorers' behaviour and body language after the goal and the adjacent reaction of his teammates. In the case of the interruptions initiated by the referee and subsequent player reactions and protests, we focused on the 67 cards issued by the referee in the two datasets, thereby paying particular attention to referee's positioning on the pitch and the players' potential approaching of the official. All scenes were examined according to a) the course of actions, b) the main agents' bodily movements, c) the behaviour of players/teammates in close proximity, d) the players'/referees' facial expressions and gestures, e) the inclusion of further resources (e.g. yellow card or whistle), and f) the resolution/breaking up of the situation. The identification of unfamiliar and perhaps adapted social practices is based on deviations from what we may, in line with Mondada and colleagues, label "routines" during a soccer match.³⁸

It is important to keep in mind that our description and interpretation of both communicative acts was, to an extent, influenced by the position of the camera and the filming perspective – this both to our advantage and disadvantage. While the camera tends to focus on the goal scorer or the referee respectively when the game is interrupted, thus providing a narrowed frame for analysis, we cannot account for interesting behaviour which may have taken place outside of this frame and presented further and perhaps contradictory resources for analysis.

Analysis and results

Goal celebrations as joint communicative acts

Ever since COVID-19 was confirmed to be spreading in the UK by the end of January 2020, football clubs tried to exercise caution. Premier League executives repeatedly alerted the clubs' managers to practice social distancing (also before and after Project Restart) as illustrated in the following quote:

The Premier League chief executive Richard Masters wrote to clubs reiterating "handshakes, high fives and hugs must be avoided" following "concerning scenes" in some of the weekend's FA Cup third round ties. Solskjaer says United "will do their best" to follow the guidelines but insists it is difficult to enforce due to the natural reaction of footballers to embrace after scoring.³⁹

As stated by Manchester United's former manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, the recommended guidelines are in contrast to players' "natural" behaviour during games – specifically with regards to emotionally loaded events such as goal celebrations. It takes a conscious effort by the players to refrain from joint celebrating with other players in these moments. Still, as our analyses of several goal celebration episodes after the implementation of the Project Restart guidelines show, a number of those were played out more isolated than one may be used to. In order to exemplify this adaptation, we begin with a close analysis of goal celebrations in the last week before the temporary suspension of the season 2019/20.

Before project restart

A total of 19 goals occurred in the game week before the temporary suspension of the Premier League. The following discussion presents a qualitative analysis of selected goal celebrations. Certain factors influenced our choice of goals and goal celebrations: a) inclusion of different football clubs as to illustrate a potential trend of gatherings during goal celebrations across clubs, b) inclusion of different scorers in order to avoid focusing on a specific player's signature goal celebration, and c) inclusion of those goal celebrations that played out in front of the camera, thus offering a proper view of the celebration.

Under "normal" circumstances, goal celebrations can be characterized by a typical sequence of actions:

- (1) The player who scored runs from the goal towards the team's fan zone. Alternatively, instead of running towards the fans, players frequently perform a knee slide (or other even more acrobatic celebrations).
- (2) Most players have a signature goal celebration, including gesturing, dancing, and chanting.
- (3) The teammates typically run towards the scorer, jump on them and hug them.

Harvey Barnes' goal against Aston Villa (the match ended 4:0 for Leicester City, cf. [Table 1](#)), may serve as illustration: After he scored the 1:0, Barnes is quickly surrounded by his teammates to engage in a type of group hug. During this hug, the players put their arms around each other to form a tight circle, holding their heads closely together ([Image 2](#)). The difference to a more isolated group hug is for example observable during the game Newcastle United vs. Southampton FC (1:0), where the goal scorer Allan Saint-Maximin runs to the fans (performing a front flip on the way) and he and his teammates gather facing the fans on the stands. The fans enthusiastically celebrate the scorer and the goal and reach out to touch the players; players and fans are kept physically apart by the security personnel.



Image 2. Goal celebration following a goal by Harvey Barnes (no. 15) for Leicester City.⁴⁰

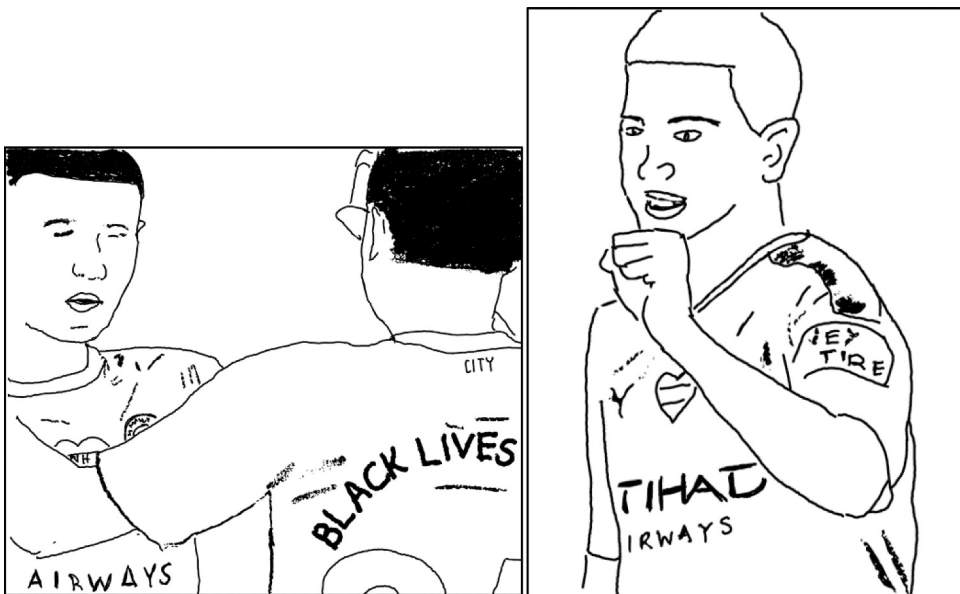
Both instances of goal celebration demonstrate physical contact between players or players, fans and stadium security.

While goal celebrations may be interrupted due to an offside call and scorers may also run to the opponent's fan corner to provoke the rival's fans, the described action scenes are exemplary for goal celebrations in football, demonstrating close physical contact between players and other agents in the stadium.⁴¹ Especially the inclusion of the fans in the goal celebration contributes to maintaining a good relationship with the crowd, an effort which is considered necessary by the larger public.⁴²

After project restart

25 goals occurred in the first week after the restart of the Premier League. As mentioned above, although the games could be taken up, they were resumed behind closed doors. Thus, celebrations between players and fans in the stadium as described above did not occur. Further, the Project Restart guidelines had been put into place, including the social distancing measure *maintain distance during goal celebrations*. Due to these circumstances, we expected the analysed goal celebrations to demonstrate a certain degree of containment amongst players during goal celebrations, as well as an adapted style of celebration due to the missing live audience in the stadium.

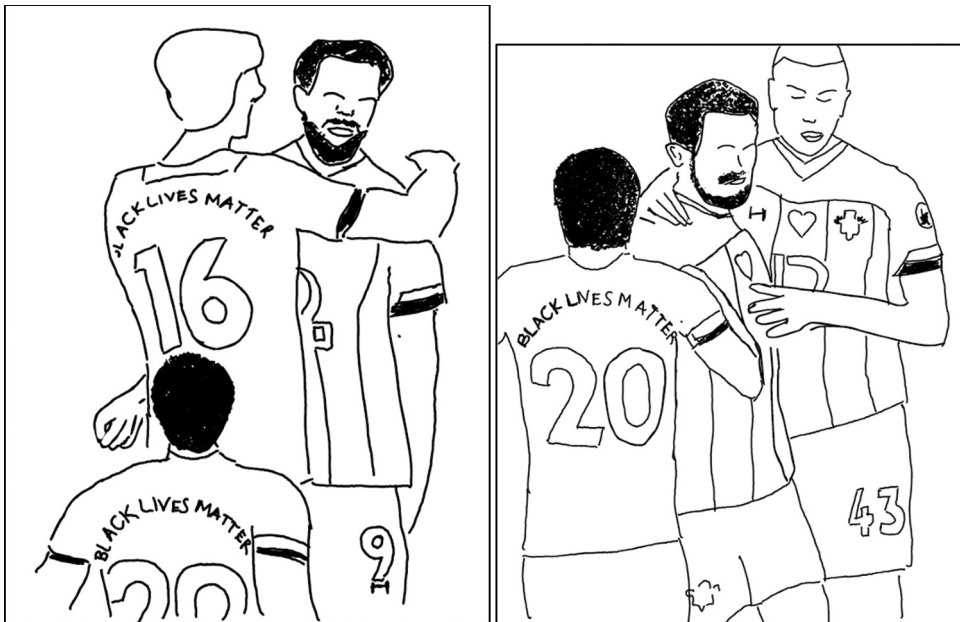
The goal celebrations in game week 30 show adaptations in various respects: Firstly, although many stadiums put up huge screens with virtual fans, the screens did not replace the fans in the stands. In the chosen games, scorers did not run towards the screens facing the remote fans. In some cases, players performed a little victory lap, however, their body language demonstrated their hesitation to gather closely with other players. This hesitation can also be seen in the players' movement and pace after scoring. Some scorers avoided running around, while others look as though they are straying around the pitch. Secondly, occasionally it seemed players tried to avoid physical closeness, for example by avoiding group hugs. Instead of hugging and jumping on one another to celebrate, they used gestures such as high fives and the established "social distancing greeting" of fist bumps. Such gestures are illustrated in Images 3 and 4 below.



Images 3 and 4. Goal celebrations by Phil Foden (1:0) and by Riyad Mahrez (2:0) for Manchester City vs. Burnley FC.

Interestingly, some of our observations of the social action of goal celebration show similarities with Mondada and her team's findings on greetings.⁴³ The researchers observe that "[w]ith the beginning of the crisis, hugs become increasingly non-straightforward. This is visible in the participants' hesitations, suspensions, and momentary withdrawals before finally engaging in hugging'.⁴⁴ While the status and functions of hugging as a form of greeting and as a means to celebrate are perhaps somewhat different, yet, hugging in both contexts represents a well-established social practice. Consequently, alternative actions which participants engage in to greet one another on and off the pitch, such as fist bumps, also make their way into the soccer arena as adapted expressions of human sociality.

Yet, not all goal celebrations show players adapting their way of celebrating and some goal celebrations played out similarly to before the implemented measures with players still gathering and hugging. All in all, however, players seemed more reserved and hesitant to celebrate as enthusiastically as before (for instance by screaming and jumping on top of each other); it seems that in general, goal celebrations without fans in the stadium and without authentic fan cheering are less ecstatic. This constrained celebrating is visible in players facial expressions as exemplified in the illustrations of goal celebration below (s. Images 5 and 6).



Images 5 and 6. Goal celebration by Danny Ings (1:0) for Southampton FC against Norwich City.

After scoring the first goal for Southampton (the match ended 3:0 against Norwich City), Danny Ings at first seems to run towards the empty fan stands, but then turns towards his teammates, who are simultaneously approaching him. While his teammates No. 16 and No. 20 immediately go in for a hug, as seen in Image 5, other players hold back. Yan Valery, in Image 6 on the right, kept some distance at first, celebrating by hand clapping, but subsequently put his arm around Ings.

The analysis of the goal celebrations in games after Project Restart evinces the following: As a consequence of the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the measures taken by the Premier League, agents in the soccer arena renegotiate their social interactions with one another. This renegotiation process is accompanied by hesitation during the performance of certain familiar actions and a slowing down of pace to coordinate one's actions with one another. While some goal celebrations happened in similar ways to those prior to Project Restart, goal celebrations with more extensive

movements and physical acts, such as the scorer jumping in the air or being jumped on by his teammates, hardly occurred anymore.

After Nicolas Pépé's goal for Arsenal, putting them in a 1:0 lead against Brighton & Hove Albion (with the game resulting in 2:1 for Brighton), his teammates surround him for a group hug. They gather in front of the empty fan stands, wrapped in banners of images of supporters. On other occasions, the missing fan communities were replaced by a large screen showing fans cheering goals at home in their living room. These displays are, in a way, representative of the adapted communicative setting after Project Restart and the distance between players and supporters becomes visible in the atmosphere during celebration. Although three Arsenal players gather after Pépé's goal, the absence of the fans, and their substitution in the form of a banner, creates a strange feeling.

In order to limit the effects of social distancing in the sense of relational distancing, certain broadcasters (e.g. Sky Sports) implemented a celebration camera during Premier League games: "For goal celebrations, players should maintain distance from one another and 'where feasible, broadcasters will identify a celebration camera which players can head to after scoring'"⁴⁵.

The isolated celebration of goal scorer Bruno Fernandes (shown in Image 7) exemplifies the integration of this celebration camera. Due to the players' hesitation to trigger close physical contact with his teammates, he attends directly to the celebration camera for viewers at home.

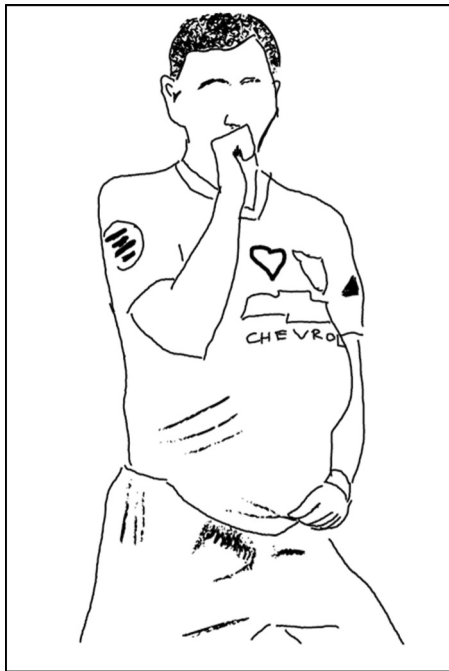


Image 7. Bruno Fernandes equalizes for Manchester United (1:1) in the game against Tottenham Hotspur.

As public figures, professional soccer players are attributed social responsibility, perhaps even more so during a time of pandemic when social distancing measures amongst various groups of people are negotiated. As such, they can expect their behaviour and efforts to adhere to social distancing measures to be under public scrutiny. The analysis of the goal celebrations has documented that these joint communicative acts have undergone certain adaptations after the restart of the Premier League Season 2019/20. It remains unclear whether players are adapting their behaviour due to the

guidelines, or whether empty stadiums are responsible for the adaptation of these joint communicative acts. Likely, it is a combination of both.

Player – referee interactions as joint communicative acts

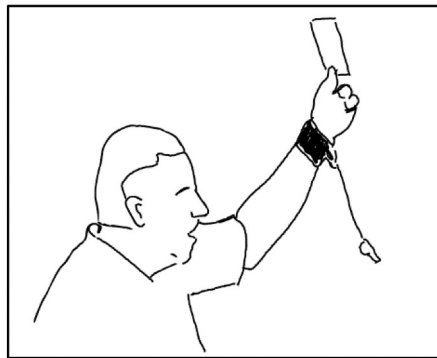
As regards the second focus of analysis, the player-referee interactions, the multimodal analysis of the two datasets focused primarily on interactions immediately preceding or following the issuing of yellow or red cards.

Before project restart

In the 10 games before Project Restart, 40 yellow cards were issued by the referees, as well as one red card. Two scenes had to be excluded from the analysis because the interaction between the referee and the players was not captured by the camera. In the remaining 38 scenes, three main types of joint communicative acts have been identified: interaction over distance, close individual player-referee interaction, and surrounding the referee.

Interaction over distance

In a majority (33) of the scenes, interaction takes place over a distance. The referee blows his whistle to interrupt the game, which is typically followed by a gesture towards the respective player (Image 8) and shortly afterwards holds up a hand issuing the yellow card (Image 9). In some cases, the referee is also seen running towards the targeted player.



Images 8 and 9. Referee gesturing towards the cautioned player and holding up the yellow card.

In this scene, the player, the target of the referee's action, is a few steps away from the referee. The players frequently express their acknowledgement of or discontent with the situation through non-verbal gestures and facial expressions as shown in Image 10, but usually maintain their distance and do not further engage in any other action.



Image 10. Tottenham's Érik Lamela's reaction after being booked (Burnley FC – Tottenham Hotspurs).

Thus, the communicative act in question is initiated by the referee via non-verbal means (since it must be visible/audible over a distance) with the intent of signalling the player that he is booked. It represents a joint communicative act because of the referee's action and the player's reaction: the referee needs to know that the correct player has taken notice of his booking, thus the respective cooperative reaction is usually a non-verbal sign of acknowledgement or frustration (see Image 10).

Interaction over distance often occurs after a clear foul, when there is not much room for interpretation. The direct issuing of the only red card in Round 29 (Moussa Djenepo, Southampton FC – Newcastle United) also follows this pattern: After an unmistakable foul the referee books the player in question by pointing at him and showing him the yellow card first. The scene is, however, under investigation for a possible red card, as displayed on the screen in the stadium. After reviewing the scene, the referee makes a gesture showing that he has consulted the VAR and consequently, issues a direct red card. The issuing of the red card again follows the structure "interaction over distance".

Close individual player-referee interaction

In two other scenes, a second type of joint communicative act can be observed: The player who is getting booked tries to negotiate or reason with the referee, as shown in Image 11, where Crystal Palace's Zaha is in an intense discussion with the referee about the yellow card that has been issued. Immediately after hearing the referee's whistle, Zaha jumps up and runs towards the referee, already heavily gesturing with both his arms. He stops right in front of the referee, still gesturing with his index fingers, staring intensely at the referee (see Image 11). The referee more or less remains on his spot and uses gestures to clarify why the foul resulted in a justified booking. In this scene, player and referee engage in an intense discussion, using speech (inaudible on recording) and body language to get their respective messages across.

This type of joint communicative act is also interesting in terms of intent and effect. Never in the history of football has a referee ever taken back a decision on a foul or a yellow/red card based on a complaint or argument with the respective player – a study from 2015 documented that not only do vocal complaints have no effect on referee decision-making, it makes referees even more likely to sanction such players for that behaviour by issuing a yellow card afterwards.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, these types of player-referee interactions can be observed frequently during games. Players' motivation to negotiate with the referee thus may not necessarily be rational, but rather emotional – expressing frustration, disbelief or even anger.



Image 11. Crystal Palace's Zaha expressing his frustration by gesturing with both his index fingers.

Surrounding the referee

A third type of joint communicative act observed in round 10 of the Premier League concerns crowd-gathering or surrounding the referee. An example of this is displayed in Image 12. It illustrates three Manchester City players surrounding the match official before he has even had the chance to issue the yellow card. All three players are gesturing heavily with their hands. Even though it is inaudible what the players are arguing about, based on their body language (throwing hands up, pointing them towards the referee) and their lip movements it seems all three players are gesturing and talking rather aggressively simultaneously to the referee. This interaction appears to be less of a co-constructed discussion, but rather a three-fold simultaneous appeal.

In Round 29, this type of interaction can be observed particularly in games where tension is high. In the example above, the referee's decision is perceived as unfair by Manchester City. Moreover, emotions are running high because time is running out and the draw (0–0) can still tip in any team's favour and, on top of that, Manchester United vs. Manchester City is a city derby, which adds to the tension.⁴⁷ Surrounding match officials, no matter what the reason is, represents exactly the type of interaction the on-field protocols of Project Restart prohibit.

After project restart

In the 10 games after Project Restart (round 30), a total of 26 yellow cards and one red card were issued. If the Project Restart on-field protocol was adhered to, the third type of joint communicative act (surrounding the referee) should not have occurred. Of the interactions directly preceding or following the issuing of these cards, one was not captured on camera and was thus excluded from the analysis. Of the remaining 26 cards issued, the majority (18) represents the first type of joint communicative acts ("interaction over distance"), consisting of the referee moving, gesturing and issuing the yellow card towards the targeted player, followed by some type of reaction or acknowledgement of said player. This is not surprising, since communicating over distance is in line with the social distancing rules set by Project Restart.

There is still one instance, where close individual referee-player interaction (second type of joint communicative act) takes place. In this particular scene, Crystal Palace's Jordan Ayew is not content with the referee's decision, resulting in a similar scene exemplified in the previous section (cf. Image 11).



Image 12. Three Man City players surround the match official after he has given a free-kick to the opposing team (Manchester United – Manchester City).

Looking at the remaining interactions caused or accompanied by bookings, there are two instances where crowd-building and surrounding the referee does occur even though the social distancing measures prohibit it. In the first instance, the crowd-gathering happens during overtime, in the game between Aston Villa and Chelsea FC. In minute 95, the referee first books Chelsea’s N’Golo Kanté for a foul; the player-referee interaction follows the previously detailed joint communicative act of communicating over distance. While the referee is issuing the yellow card and awards a free kick for Aston Villa, emotions run high with Aston Villa’s Jack Grealish, who was fouled by Kanté just before, leading to a heated exchange of multiple players from both teams shouting, gesturing and even pushing each other. In the end, the referee tries to deescalate the situation and finds himself surrounded by players.

The live commentary by the SKY broadcasters underlines well what is happening in this scene: “Well, the normal distancing rules going out of the window there as tempers flared a little”.⁴⁸ Similar to the explanations offered for crowd-gathering in the previous section, the players surround the referee in this instance because tension is high and “tempers flared a little”, aided by the fact that it is overtime and Chelsea is narrowly in the lead with 2–1, thus this might be Aston Villa’s last chance to score a draw.

The other scene involving crowd-gathering and consequently ignoring social distancing rules occurs in the game Everton FC playing Liverpool FC. It is minute 61, the score is 0–0, and Everton’s defender Lucas Digne prevents a Chelsea attack, providing Chelsea with a good freekick opportunity. The referee is surrounded by multiple Everton players apparently complaining that the foul was indeed not a foul. In this scene, the draw as well as the perceived unfoundedness of the referee’s decision eventually lead to the Everton players surrounding the referee. Obviously, even though surrounding the referee was officially prohibited by the Project Restart regulations, high tension in these two scenes still led to ignoring social distancing rules.

In contrast to the interactions observed before Project Restart, there are also five instances in Round 30 based on a mixture of the first and third type of joint communicative act, i.e. a blend of interacting over distance and surrounding the referee. In these scenes, the referee blows the whistle to

indicate a foul, communicating the booking via hand gestures, and immediately all players in the referees' vicinity react by making gestures, and approach the referee to start a discussion. It is interesting to observe, however, that in these scenes, after taking that initial step towards the referee, players seem to restrain themselves and turn around. For instance, in the game AFC Bournemouth against Crystal Palace, the referee interrupts the game due to Bournemouth's Lewis Cook committing a foul in minute 67– immediately after the whistle, five Bournemouth and four Crystal Palace players throw hands and start running a few steps towards the referee. However, some of the players stop halfway, some start walking slowly, some turn around. The referee himself walks slowly towards the fouled player, thereby issuing the yellow card to Lewis Cook (interaction over distance), though still being surrounded by multiple players, yet from a distance of a few metres.

In another of these instances, the players move closer to the referee but while engaging in discussion, they adhere to social distancing measures, as exemplified in Image 13.

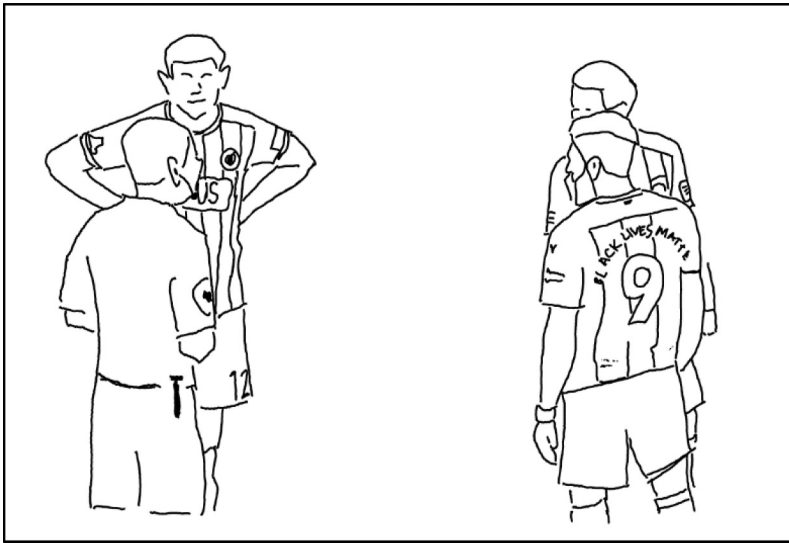


Image 13. Players surrounding the referee maintaining social distance (Newcastle – Sheffield United).

Noticeable in this image is also the body language, which is completely different compared to the second type of communicative act (close player-referee interaction) – it seems more relaxed, with No. 9 and the player behind him having their arms comfortably aligned to their torsos, and the player behind the referee having his arms akimbo.

We are aware that referee-player interactions do not only occur preceding or following bookings, as crowd-gathering can occur in any interruption of the game. Nevertheless, the analysis of player-referee interactions surrounding bookings has demonstrated that under certain circumstances, especially when tension is high, players do not restrain from gathering. In other instances, efforts to restrain from surrounding the match official are visible. Consequently, players and referees seem to be aware that they have a responsibility to adhere to these guidelines in order to continue the season.

Again, one can only speculate how much the presence or rather absence of an audience contributes to the emotional response of players in such situations. In Image 13, one of the reasons why the four agents seem to be discussing a foul in a more relaxed manner might be the absence of the fans. Leitner and Richlan recently documented that referees in the “Austrian Bundesliga” were indeed less involved in “emotional situations” when it was a game without spectators than prior to the COVID-19 lockdown.⁴⁹ Also the referees' decision-making processes certainly seem to be affected by the lack of an audience,⁵⁰ therefore it would only be logical if it affected the players'

behaviour, too. To investigate this further, an analysis of all game interruptions (independent of bookings) or crowd-gatherings could give further insights into how effective social distancing rules on the pitch actually are.

Conclusion

Desperate times call for desperate measures – In the past two years and especially during the peaks of the pandemic, society as a whole has had to adapt to measures in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While social distancing measures may not be perceived universally as “desperate measures”, official guidelines sanctioning physical closeness are challenging for certain professional domains/interactions to follow as they require a conscious handling of actions which are at the core of these formats and which, under normal circumstances, do not require any consideration. To refrain from hugging and gathering, for instance, when celebrating a goal or surrounding a match official in the context of (professional) football, calls for a certain degree of self-composure and restraint – qualities which may not come easy in the heat of the moment.

In this paper, we focused on whether and if yes, to what extent specific types of interactions on the soccer pitch displayed a certain adaptability to the restrictive circumstances as part of social distancing. An exploratory qualitative analysis of joint communicative acts of player-player interactions during goal celebrations and player-referee interactions after referee decisions advanced two types of adaptations after the implementation of the Project Restart guidelines, namely physical and emotional distancing. Physical distancing was visible in reduced gathering or crowd-building. In those cases in which players nevertheless gathered in close proximity, they seemed to do this in smaller numbers and for less time. Emotional distancing can be seen in players’ limited emotionality expressed when engaging physically with one another. It seems as though less emotional reactions led to more constrained celebrations or protests on the pitch. This may partly be due to the missing audience in the stadium, which usually intensifies emotions when cheering the players.

A large-scale quantitative analysis would be necessary to confirm trends regarding the adaptation of agents’ communicative behaviour on the pitch. We cannot generalize the findings of this qualitative study and argue that the Project Restart guidelines have been implemented systematically. Still, the present analysis documents a certain degree of players’ self-containment in emotionally loaded situations, suggesting that professional soccer players are aware of their social responsibility as public figures to implement the guidelines, as well as a sense of solidarity with other contexts which were fully impeded by lockdown measures.

Notes

1. Lewis, “COVID-19: Preliminary Data”; Mondada et al. “Changing Social Practices”.
2. Mondada et al. “Changing Social Practices”.
3. Hanin, “Social Psychology and Sport”; Kaya, “Decision Making by Coaches and Athletes in Sport”.
4. For an overview, see e.g. Askin, Diederich and Bieri, *Aesthetics, Poetics and Rhetoric of Soccer*; Caldwell et al., *Discourse of Sport*; Lavric et al., *Linguistics of Football*.
5. See Braun et al., “MEMoFC: Introducing the Multilingual Emotional Football Corpus”; Callies and Levin, ‘*Corpus Approaches to the Language of Sports*’; Lavric et al. *Linguistics of Football*; Pérez-Sabater et al., “Spoken Genre Gets Written”; Petkova, *Multiples Code-Switching*.
6. See Baines, “Translating Tweets in the Soccer Industry”; Hayes Sauder and Blazka, ‘23 Players, 23 Voices’; Messerli and Yu, “Multimodal Construction of Soccer-related Humor”.
7. See Burckhardt, “Fan-Kommunikation im Fussballstadion”; Hoffmann, “Cognitive Sociolinguistic Aspects of Football Chants”.
8. Lavric and Steiner, “Communication Strategies in Multilingual (European) Football Teams”; Lavric and Steiner, “Multilingualism in Football Teams”.
9. Bandyopadhyay, *COVID-19 and the Soccer World*; Carmody et al., “Football-specific Strategies to Reduce COVID-19 Transmission”, 1363.

10. At this point in time (January 2022), the adaptation of the joint communicative acts under scrutiny is hardly (if at all) observable. For this reason, the authors do not claim a general (non-reversible) adaptation of interaction on the pitch. Instead, and in line with human's ability to (linguistically) adapt to the situation or circumstances (see e.g. Moore, "Football is not 'a matter of Life and Death'"), we want to show instances of how these particular agents adapted their interactions and communication on the pitch.
11. Based on Reich, "Cooperative Nature of Communicative Acts".
12. Mondada et al., "Changing Social Practices"; Mondada et al. "Human sociality in the times of the COVID-19 Pandemic"; Mondada et al., "Doing Paying During the COVID-19 Pandemic".
13. Ibid.
14. Mondada et al. "Human sociality in the times of the COVID-19 Pandemic".
15. Garfinkel, *Studies in ethnomethodology*, 42–53, as discussed in Mondada et al., "Human sociality in the times of the COVID-19 Pandemic", 444–446.
16. Mondada et al., "Doing Paying During the COVID-19 Pandemic".
17. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*; Searle, *Speech Acts*; Searle, "A Taxonomy of Speech Acts".
18. Reich, "The Cooperative Nature of Communicative Acts", 1352.
19. Huang and Wu, "Communicative Acts".
20. Reich, "The Cooperative Nature of Communicative Acts".
21. McLaren and Spink, "Team Member Communication"; Sullivan and Feltz, "Scale for Effective Communication in Team Sports"; Sullivan and Short, "Further Operationalization of Intra-team Communication in Sports".
22. Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen. "'Was reden die Fussballer' Teil 3: Die nonverbalen Codes". *10 vor 10*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.srf.ch/sendungen/10vor10/die-sprache-des-fussballs>. Video.
23. Ibid.
24. Lavric and Steiner, "Communication Strategies in Multilingual (European) Football Teams"; Lavric and Steiner, "Multilingualism in Football Teams".
25. Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, "'Was reden die Fussballer' Teil 1: Auf dem Platz". *10 vor 10*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.srf.ch/sendungen/10vor10/die-sprache-des-fussballs>. Video.
26. Lev et al., "Deconstructing Celebratory Acts".
27. Lex et al., "Influence of players' vocalizations".
28. Premier League, "Project Restart", <https://www.premierleague.com/season-review/the-football/1747767?articleId=1747767>
29. Premier League, "Season 2019/20 Restart Guide", <https://resources.premierleague.com/premierleague/document/2020/06/16/aa4f9f51-f97b-4582-907b-29fabbe74f69/Premier-League-2019-20-Restart-Guide.pdf>.
30. Ibid., 5.
31. Hanin, "Soccer and Emotion".
32. World Football, "Premier League 2019/2020, 29. Round", <https://www.worldfootball.net/schedule/eng-premier-league-2019-2020-spieltag/29/>.
33. World Football, "Premier League 2019/2020, 30. Round", <https://www.worldfootball.net/schedule/eng-premier-league-2019-2020-spieltag/30/>.
34. Full Match Sports, "Full Match Replay", <https://fullmatchsports.cc/full-match-replay/epl-2019-2020-full-match/>.
35. Bezemer and Jewitt, "Multimodal Analysis: Key Issues"; Jewitt, *Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*.
36. Bezemer and Jewitt, "Multimodal Analysis: Key Issues".
37. Ibid., 7.
38. Mondada et al. "Human sociality in the times of the COVID-19 Pandemic".
39. Samuel Luckhurst, "Ole Gunnar Solskjaer Speaks Out on Manchester United Celebrations amid Premier League Clampdown", *Manchester Evening News*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/ole-gunnar-solskjaer-speaks-out-19614226>.
40. For the sake of exemplification and in order to visually support our analysis, we have added a few sketches of "snapshots" from the video recordings of the analysed games. Image 3 and all subsequent sketches were done by the author Aline Bieri.
41. Lev et al., "Deconstructing Celebratory Acts".
42. Associated Press, "Bundesliga Restarts with No Fans, Erling Haaland Celebrates Goal Alone" *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/sports/soccer/story/2020-05-16/bundesliga-restarts-with-no-fans-erling-haalnd-celebrates-goal-alone>
43. Mondada et al. "Human sociality in the times of the COVID-19 Pandemic".
44. Ibid., 448.
45. Laura Scott, "Premier League return: Fans on screens and celebration cameras to be used". BBC, June 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/53058264>.
46. Lex et al., "Influence of players' vocalizations".
47. Vanhoutte, "The Importance of Trivial Oppositions in Football Fandom".

48. Rob Hawthorne and Alan Smith, "Aston Villa vs. Chelsea FC", minute 95, <https://fullmatchsports.cc/aston-villa-vs-chelsea-full-match-2019-20/?tab=second-half>.
49. Leitner und Richlan, "Analysis System for Emotional Behaviour in Football".
50. McCarrick et al., "Home Advantage during the COVID-19 Pandemic".

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